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OO RUEHCHI RUEHDT RUEHHM RUEHNH
DE RUEHML #0651/01 0730916

ZNR UUUUU ZZH
O 130916Z MAR 08
FM AMEMBASSY MANILA

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 0125
INFO RUCNASE/ASEAN MEMBER COLLECTIVE
RHHMUNA/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 MANILA 000651

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E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [KISL](#) [KPAO](#) [RP](#) [EAID](#)

SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR FORGES KEY RELATIONSHIPS IN ISLAMIC CITY OF MARAWI, PROMOTING PEACE AND PROSPERITY

REF: A) 06 MANILA 4553
B) 07 MANILA 3909

¶1. (U) SUMMARY. On March 1, the Ambassador returned to Marawi City, the heart of Muslim Mindanao, accompanied by EAP DAS Scot Marciel. The strategic timing of the visit, near the end of the annual joint military Balikatan exercises, was intended to promote goodwill with the city's somewhat skeptical populace. The Ambassador's trip renewed two themes from her previous visit (ref A) and visits by country team members: promoting peace and prosperity, and protecting the environment. The day included a civil-military medical mission and building project, two USAID environmental programs, and a model police station training class. The visit made inroads with the people of Marawi and key individuals, although sustaining a positive relationship with the city will require ongoing attention. END SUMMARY.

MARAWI: THE ISLAMIC CITY BY THE LAKE

¶2. (U) The Islamic City of Marawi is the capital of Lanao del Sur and has a population of 130,000 that is more than 90 percent Muslim. Marawi is also the region's cultural and educational center, home to Mindanao State University (MSU). It is situated on Lake Lanao, one of the 15 ancient lakes of the world, which serves as a major source of livelihood for the city's residents and provides 70 percent of the city's power. The population of Marawi remains among the poorest in the Philippines, however, and relatively isolated, as logistics make travel to and from the city difficult.

¶3. (SBU) Although still generally pro-America, there are factions of Muslim Mindanao, and Marawi in particular, that are suspicious of U.S. military activities. The Ambassador leveraged the visibility enjoyed by U.S. envoys in the Philippines to draw attention to the military's humanitarian efforts. She was met by roughly 20 protestors on the MSU campus and a well-coordinated anti-U.S. military sign campaign across the city. However, as evidence that this is not the sentiment of the majority, the Ambassador was also greeted by large, enthusiastic crowds throughout the day.

SHOULDER-TO-SHOULDER HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE

¶4. The day began with a visit to a medical civil action program (MEDCAP), coordinated as part of Balikatan -- an annual joint "shoulder-to-shoulder" military exercise and humanitarian project. The U.S. military and Armed Forces of the Philippines provided medical and dental services to nearly 350 Marawi residents. The Ambassador also cut the ribbon on two elementary school classrooms built jointly by 120 U.S. and Philippine troops and furnished by a private non-profit foundation. During the ribbon cutting ceremony, the City Administrator remarked that Marawi is a peaceful city, despite its opposition to Balikatan. He welcomed, on behalf of the city, the medical missions and building projects. The Ambassador responded that improved health and education are the greatest gifts

we can give to the people of Marawi.

PROMOTING ENVIRONMENTAL AWARENESS

¶5. (U) The Ambassador reconnected with members of the Philippine Muslim Women's Council (PMWC), with whom she had met during her previous visit to Marawi. At that time, the PMWC received a USAID grant to develop an action plan for the conservation of Lake Lanao. Lake Lanao has become increasingly polluted from sewage and agricultural waste, indiscriminate logging, and excessive land use. With the grant, the PMWC convened focus groups, developed a plan for improving lake management, and embarked on a publicity campaign. The Ambassador commended the women for their leadership, and complimented them for their work at the local level, for taking environmental responsibility seriously, and for creating inclusive partnerships. She commended them for passing the lake's treasure to the next generation, as reflected by their motto, "Our Lake, Let Us Save It."

¶6. (U) Later, the Ambassador was greeted by a large crowd at a local mosque, where she witnessed the signing of an MSU-EcoGov grant agreement. Through USAID's EcoGov program, the mosque was given funding to improve its ablution facilities. The Ambassador also presented local religious leaders with "Al Khalifa," a resource book for Muslim communities on environmental management practices. Her message was one of environmental responsibility for the future of the city's children. The newly selected President of Mindanao State University praised the United States for its generosity, thanked the Ambassador for her assistance, and noted the long history of American support. (MSU was built by Americans, its first teachers Peace Corps Volunteers.) The Ambassador had the opportunity earlier in the day to discuss with the MSU President the importance of education and to renew the U.S. commitment to facilitating

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educational exchanges.

MODEL POLICING: KEEPING THE CITY SAFE

¶7. (U) The Ambassador also had the opportunity to stress the importance of community safety to promoting peace. The city of Marawi was selected as one of ten Model Police Stations in the Philippines to receive assistance through the International Criminal Investigative Training and Assistance Program (ICITAP). More than 100 Marawi police officers have received training on subjects such as crime scene investigation, community policing, and human rights. The Ambassador met with 15 police officers and cadets who had benefited from the program. They briefed her on their progress and shared with pride how they are learning from each other. Among the group were several female cadets, a rare but important asset in Muslim Mindanao. The Ambassador congratulated the group and commented on the importance of their work. DAS Marciel also addressed the group, noting that it was beneficial for him to see first-hand the success of the programs that Washington funds.

A MESSAGE OF PEACE AND PARTNERSHIP

¶8. (U) The Ambassador's visit to Marawi was an important step in cementing the friendship between the U.S. and the local -- sometimes skeptical-- population. Based on the positive media coverage, the efforts seem to be working. During an interview at a local radio station, the Ambassador noted the importance of the Philippine-American partnership. The interviewer, proud of his recent selection as an International Visitor program participant, thanked the Ambassador for the USG's continued assistance. The Ambassador praised him for communicating a message of peace.

¶9. (SBU) COMMENT. The Ambassador's trip to Marawi was marked with interesting contrasts and contradictions. At the mosque ceremony a local Imam prayed for an end to the U.S. military presence, but thanked the United States for its humanitarian efforts. Signs in the center of town counted down the days until the end of Balikatan, but families lined up by the hundreds to receive military medical

assistance. These contradictions reflect the delicate balance of public opinion, easily swayed by negative external influence. Also of note, key local officials, including the governor and mayor, were absent from the day's events, perhaps signaling their hesitation to publicly support U.S. activities. Nonetheless, the Ambassador's trip was timely and garnered much-needed support in an area of the Philippines particularly sensitive to U.S. presence. END COMMENT.